

Presentation software

If you've ever had to create a presentation on a PC, chances are you used PowerPoint. But is Microsoft's market leader the best choice? Adam Banks compares its main rivals to find out

Power corrupts; PowerPoint corrupts absolutely. That's the opinion of Edward Tufte, an expert on information design. Anyone who's ever had to sit through a lacklustre PC-based presentation knows where he's coming from: what should be a way to add impact and interest can end up turning even the best ideas into a yawn-inducing mush. With this in mind, we tested PowerPoint alongside its main rivals to find out which delivered the best presentations at the best price.

Presentation software is the standard medium of communication in business, education and even politics. As you talk your audience through your argument, you show a series of images, known as slides from pre-digital days. Each contains a few bullet points – brief pieces of text summarising the main ideas – and maybe a picture or chart. Between slides there's a transition effect, such as a fade, where one image grows fainter as the next replaces it. Within each slide, there may also be builds, where bullet points or graphics appear one by one.

CONTENT IS KING

'Rich media' is the buzzword for whacking more and more multimedia shenanigans into presentations. But audiences are usually more interested in rich content: good ideas presented comprehensibly. Few presenters have the time or skills to construct an immersive multimedia experience. What you need is software to help you summarise ideas in a clear, attractive format. You'll need ready-made templates that look professional and help to structure your information.

Built-in charting features are useful; if you import graphs you've made using other software, they won't match the style of your presentation, and the chart your audience can grasp at a glance onscreen should be different from what you'd prepare for a printed report.

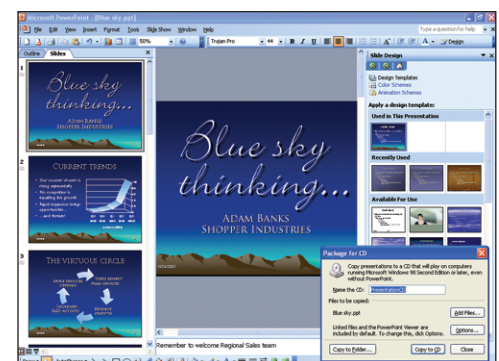
As well as providing ready-made visual themes, most of the packages offer content templates for the types of information you might want to present, such as a strategy proposal or sales presentation. But it's not always obvious whether a template represents accepted best practice or someone's suggestions, and there's a predictable US-centric bias in approach and language.

STAND AND DELIVER

Delivering your presentation needs as much thought as creating it. The easiest way to present is on your own laptop, since all your software is there and you know it's going to work. In many meeting rooms and auditoria, you can hook up your laptop to a projector.

It's trickier if you use an in-house computer, as you must make sure it has compatible software. What they have is usually PowerPoint, so you'll have to supply your presentation as a PowerPoint (*.ppt) file. Although most other programs can save to .ppt format, there are bound to be glitches, so you'll need to check your finished file, ideally in PowerPoint. Re-opening the .ppt in the same program will at least reveal some omissions.

To send a presentation for people to see themselves, you need to export it to a standard format or include a player program. PowerPoint lets you bundle files with Microsoft's PowerPoint Viewer. You can use this program to play .ppt files from other presentation packages. WordPerfect Presentations and Lotus Freelance Graphics have their own distributable players. Some packages export to Flash, which most users can play in a web browser, but certain transitions and animations may not be supported. Others can save a presentation as a movie file, which limits interactive features.



▲ You'll need effective templates to get you started and practical options for sharing your finished presentation

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How we test Presentation software

We looked at each package with a view to creating a straightforward, attractive presentation that had an intro slide, bullet point slides, simple diagrams and graphs. We hoped to find a choice of relevant page templates and classy visual themes, and facilities for creating neat, legible charts. The slides seen in the screenshots were created using the tools and artwork supplied within each program.

We expected basic transition and animation features; it should be easy to choose from a variety of effects for moving from one slide to the next, and to make items within each slide appear one by

one. All the programs offered these functions and could add movie and sound clips. We weren't too bothered about advanced multimedia or interactive features; these aren't involved in most presentations.

Most programs import PowerPoint files and save to PowerPoint format with varying degrees of success. But it's hard to say which program would give the fewest glitches with your presentation; simple and advanced functions can go astray. We noted any export formats supported, such as Flash and PDF, which help deliver your presentations to other users without being present in the room.

MICROSOFT PowerPoint 2003



£170 inc VAT



PowerPoint is part of Microsoft Office, so the user interface should seem familiar. When you first start it up, PowerPoint doesn't do much to help you figure out what to do next. If you choose to start from a template, you're placed back into the main screen with just a single slide created. You're not shown the Slide Layout pane, which lets you choose what to put on your slide, unless you open it yourself.

There's plenty of documentation via Help or the Office Assistant, but no obvious reason why a package with such a focused purpose couldn't guide you more. The AutoContent Wizard provides three dozen content templates for a range of business communication scenarios, such as a sales pitch or strategy proposal. This is useful, although it feels a little tacked-on, displaying in a box that doesn't match the rest of the interface.

PowerPoint's visual templates don't consist of much except a background image and text styles, but

you can mix and match any slide layout with any template, and you can change the colour scheme with one click. The template selection isn't huge, and only a few of them break out of the flat graphical style that's been a cliché of PC presentations for a decade. Via the New pane, however, you can click through to an online library of additional free templates, some of which are impressive.

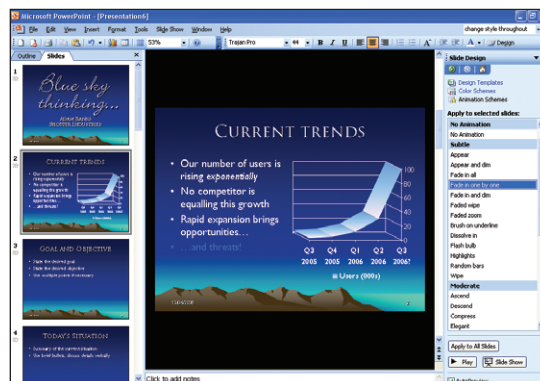
Choosing a Microsoft package does give an advantage in sourcing extra content.

Just about every feature you could want is supported, from an extensive range of charts and diagrams to builds, transitions and interactive elements. It's left up to you to exploit the possibilities. You'll find a preset slide layout to suit most purposes, with consistently styled elements neatly positioned. However, the fonts aren't adjusted to match a chosen template and preset graphical styles can look amateurish.

SUMMARY

- ☒ Comprehensive features
- ☒ Effective templating system
- ☒ Should provide more guidance

PRESENTATION SOFTWARE Requires Windows 2000 SP3/XP, 233MHz Pentium processor, 128MB RAM, 150MB disk space
SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk
DETAILS www.microsoft.com/uk/office/powerpoint



▲ Once you figure out where to start, it's not difficult to structure a consistent-looking presentation in PowerPoint 2003

You can save work with fonts embedded so colleagues can open and edit it even if they don't have the fonts installed. You can also choose Package for CD to save a folder, or burn straight to CD, complete with PowerPoint Viewer so most Windows users can view a presentation without PowerPoint. Producer 2003, a free upgrade for licensed users, adds extra multimedia features to help make distributable rich media presentations.

PowerPoint is still the best all-round business presentation package. It's just a pity there isn't more heavyweight competition to challenge Microsoft. The Office 2007 version promises graphical improvements and PDF creation, but whether there's progress towards creating better presentations out of the box remains to be seen.



Offer open to UK residents aged 18 or over only; offer available to purchasers of CLP-550, CLP-550N, CLP-600, CLP-600N, ML-2550, ML-2551N, ML-3560, ML-3561N and ML-3561ND Samsung printers only; qualifying models of printer must be purchased new (not second-hand) between 1st April 2006 and 31st July 2006 from a retailer in the UK and originally sourced from Samsung Electronics (UK) Ltd (check with retailer for confirmation); offer only available to end-users; 5 Year Warranty is provided on same terms as standard one year warranty except it lasts for five years following purchase; Value of 5 year warranty based on SSP (suggested selling price) of extended warranty for CLP-600N; 5 Year Warranty documentation will be sent

SUN MICROSYSTEMS StarOffice 8: Impress

PRESENTATION RATING ★★★★★
£40 inc VAT (suite)



Sun markets its business suite as a "replacement for Microsoft Office", a bit overblown as you don't get as many features. But the 80:20 rule says you'll use 20 per cent of an application's features 80 per cent of the time. On that basis you can't overlook a product that might offer everything you need for a tenth of the price.

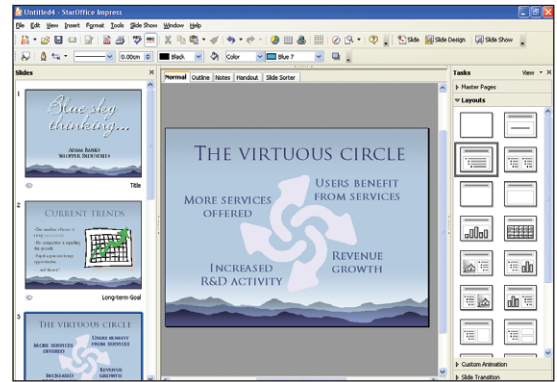
Impress, the counterpart of PowerPoint, got a facelift in this version. Sun admits to mimicking PowerPoint features to enhance compatibility and familiarity, and Impress does look similar, but its user interface is clearer. A helpful startup wizard lets you choose from 20-odd content templates, pick from twice as many visual styles, then choose a transition style – the last essential element of a complete presentation – rather than having to set it later. You can even type a few ideas to put on the slides, so you're not starting from pure dummy text.

An obvious alternative is to import a PowerPoint file, and this you can do, with a good level of compatibility.

Not only presentations but also *.pot templates can be opened, and though some bits and pieces may go astray, there's not much to fix up. StarOffice comes with similar fonts to Office, in case you don't have them. So you can exploit the huge resource of PowerPoint templates available.

Most everyday features are found in a similar form to PowerPoint. Bullet builds and motion paths are easily accessible from the Custom Animation pane, and there are lots of PowerPoint-equivalent transitions. Charts are a little more primitive and fiddly to customise. Venn diagrams, flowcharts and so on are lacking, so you'd have to spend a lot of extra time creating them using the drawing tools.

Unlike PowerPoint, Impress can save to PDF, but don't expect more than a static image of each slide. You can export a presentation as a Flash movie, which worked well; not all transitions are supported, but most elements came out fine. Impress



▲ StarOffice may not have all the features of PowerPoint, but it's similar in many ways and very neatly presented

doesn't have its own free viewer, but you can save in PowerPoint format or in various OpenOffice formats (see page 123), so you shouldn't have much trouble sharing files.

Impress is in the PowerPoint mould, but it betters it in a few respects. Bear in mind that StarOffice is the commercial version of an open source product, OpenOffice.org, which you can download free. OpenOffice.org 2.0.2 lacks most of StarOffice's templates, clip art and fonts, and is supported only by discussion groups. These limitations are more significant with Impress than other elements of the suite, as ready-made content is an important aid to creating presentations, and Impress gets little attention on the forums. But that's no reason not to try it.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Terrific value
- ✓ Similar to PowerPoint
- ✗ Advanced features omitted

PRESENTATION SOFTWARE Requires Windows 98/Me/2000 SP2/XP, Pentium processor, 128MB RAM, 320MB disk space
SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk
DETAILS <http://uk.sun.com>

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IBM

Lotus SmartSuite 9.8: Freelance Graphics

PRESENTATION RATING ★★★

£192 inc VAT (suite)

SmartSuite isn't as old as it sounds: that's 9.8, not 1998, and this version was released in 2003. Even so, it's looking dated and some feel it's been neglected by IBM. But SmartSuite has its fans, and it's cheaper than the other mainstream office suites.

Freelance Graphics is available as part of the suite. Its tabbed user interface is straightforward and the program runs briskly. There are yellow tips and 'Guide

Me' contextual help, but it can still seem opaque, thanks partly to a surfeit of meaningless icons.

SmartMasters let you team a content template with a 'look', so you can set up a full presentation ready to fill in, rather than starting from scratch with a theme. That's the intention, but the range of templates is small and a bit random. The looks don't feel very modern, and individual slide layouts aren't impressive; the ready-made diagrams in particular look awful.

There are plenty of chart styles to present your data, and you can produce simple, legible graphs. There's a sizable collection of bog-standard clip art, with out-of-date maps. The InfoBox is a useful one-stop shop for altering properties of any given item, but it doesn't always work intuitively. It's easy to set up transitions and

SUMMARY

- ✓ SmartMasters better than templates
- ✗ Ready-made content isn't great
- ✗ Doesn't feel up to date

PRESENTATION SOFTWARE Requires Windows 95/98/Me/NT 4/2000/XP, Pentium processor, 128MB RAM, up to 293MB disk space
SUPPLIER www.dabs.com
DETAILS www.ibm.com/software/lotus



▲ Freelance will feel unfamiliar to PowerPoint users, but it's a powerful and usable program

bullet builds. Save your finished presentation in Freelance format (viewable with Lotus' free reader) or as a PowerPoint file, or export a basic HTML version. PowerPoint files can be imported.

You can do what you want with Freelance Graphics, once you know how. If you're thinking of making SmartSuite your office package then Freelance won't put you off, but it's no PowerPoint killer.

DIGITAL WORKSHOP Opus Presenter 5

★★★

£75 inc VAT

Unlike other presentation programs here, you can also use Opus to produce interactive questionnaires, multimedia shows and training applications. It comes in numerous versions; we tested Opus Presenter, which has all the features relevant to business users.

Opus doesn't support PowerPoint files, but your show can be created as a standalone presentation, a Flash file or a movie, and in each case will run on most PCs without needing any special software. Having

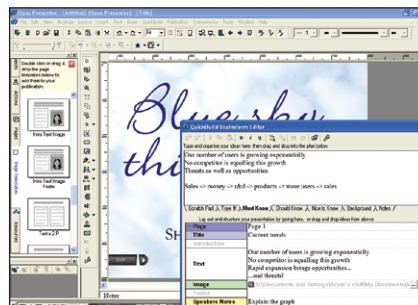
chosen a template from a small but varied selection, you can plan your presentation using the QuickBuild Brainstorm Editor, where you jot down ideas, then drag them on to an outline listing of your slides. Opus then offers to add Welcome, Title and Exit pages.

It's refreshing to see some real thought has gone into the process of creating a presentation. But the developers haven't done their own ideas justice. Opus's blurb uses phrases such as "slick presentation", "professional look", "fresh" and "exciting". Little of the content lives up to these adjectives. The program harks back to the earlier days of Windows and ran sluggishly on our test PC, which was fine with the other applications. Even saving a file was initially bewildering. There are lots of advanced

SUMMARY

- ✓ Unique and thoughtful approach
- ✗ Basic user interface
- ✗ Unattractive results

PRESENTATION SOFTWARE Requires Windows 95/98/Me/NT4 SP4/2000/XP, Pentium II processor, 100MB disk space
SUPPLIER Digital Workshop 08701 202186
DETAILS www.digitalworkshop.com



▲ Opus Presenter has unique features, including a Brainstorm Editor to get ideas in shape

animation and interactive functions, but standard features such as charts are missing.

Opus is a welcome alternative to the PowerPoint crowd, and specialist users with design skills may find it invaluable. But it isn't likely to produce a professional-looking result with a reasonable input of time and effort.

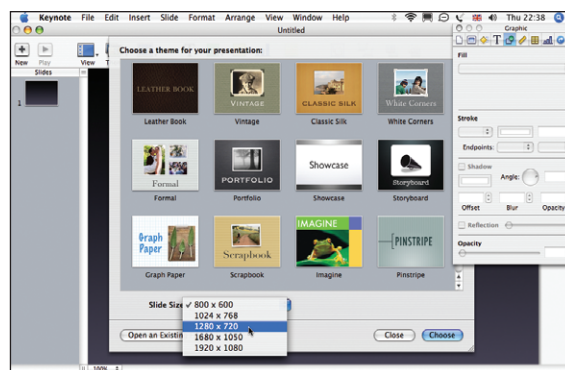
Keynote address The Apple alternative

When Apple launched Keynote, its presentation program for the Mac, in January 2003, it looked set to revolutionise presentations. For the first time, you could make a few clicks, type a few words and get slides that looked totally professional. Design-conscious presenters jumped at it immediately, and since then it's had two impressive upgrades.

Sadly, other software makers have completely ignored it, making no effort to rival its coherent, understated aesthetics. None can even produce a decent-looking chart, for example; it's up to you to reformat everything manually to get it there, and even if you have the skill and patience, you're hampered by the clumsy software. In Keynote, graphs often look great first time, and if you're fussy you can adjust everything down to the softness of the shadows.

If you have access to a Mac, it's worth trying Keynote. You'll see a gorgeous set of themes, and the first option is what size you want your slides to be. Sounds obvious? Not a single one of the Windows packages offers an up-front way to set the size or shape of slides. On a widescreen monitor, your presentation defaults to sitting in the middle, although Opus does have a scaling option. In most cases, it turns out the slide dimensions are dictated by the print setup, which is mad. Freelance's method is broken. StarOffice/OpenOffice.org doesn't seem to be able to change size at all. Only Apple has twigged that it's an issue.

Not that Keynote is perfect. It needs more themes with a tighter business focus. Graphs



are good, but easy diagrams are missing. And you can still get in a pickle laying out slides, even though the individual elements look great. But it really is time other developers learned from Apple's no-nonsense, visually led approach.

ABILITY PLUS SOFTWARE

Ability Office: Presentation



£20 inc VAT

Ability is another low-priced package that threatens Microsoft Office. The Presentation module is available separately or comes with the Standard and Small Business Editions (£40) or the Professional Edition (£50). It can import PowerPoint presentations, but not *.pot template files, and nor does it have any templates of its own: there's a set of AutoLayouts very similar to PowerPoint's Slide Layouts, but no looks or themes to apply to them, just colour schemes. When we did try loading existing PowerPoint presentations, some elements came out fine, including a detailed graph, but relatively simple text and graphics were often messed up.

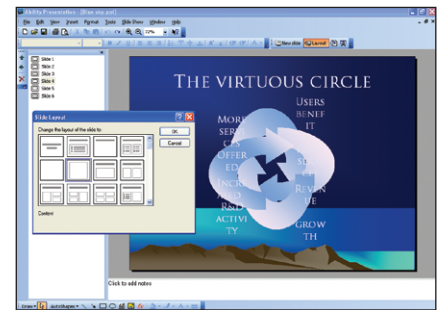
SUMMARY

- ✓ Cheap
- ✗ Doesn't do very much
- ✗ Doesn't do it very well

PRESENTATION SOFTWARE Requires Windows 98/Me/NT/2000/XP, Pentium processor, 32MB RAM, 40MB disk space
SUPPLIER Ability Plus Software
 08707 607307
DETAILS www.uk.ability.com

It's fair to say Presentation is not Ability's finest hour. The user interface imitates the Office style, which works fine in some Ability programs but in this case highlights the relative paucity of features. Where other presentation packages have a visual 'slide sorter' display, showing your whole presentation as large thumbnails, Ability's is just a list. There's no Outliner view or any of the other aids provided in other packages.

If you persevered and managed to construct a usable presentation, you could save it in PowerPoint format or as a PDF. By default, the PDF function outputs A4 pages at 300dpi resolution with each slide in the middle of a page, which is acceptable for handouts but



▲ Ability lacks templates of its own and isn't brilliant at importing PowerPoint files, so a lot of the work is left to you

not so good as a means of distribution for onscreen reading. Changing settings produced unexpected results, but we don't know why; this feature doesn't seem to be documented.

Among many other omissions, there's no spellchecker, which may partly explain why the woefully brief Help file invites you to begin by "creating your first presentation". Despite our misgivings about Microsoft's product, if our boss told us we had to swap PowerPoint for Ability, there'd be a first presentation he wouldn't forget.

COREL

WordPerfect Office X3: Presentations X3

PRESENTATION RATING ★★★
 £249 inc VAT (suite)

WordPerfect Presentations is available only as part of a suite, Corel WordPerfect Office X3. If you know PowerPoint, you can run Presentations in PowerPoint mode; we weren't bowled over by the resemblance, though.

On startup, you can choose a PerfectExpert Project to structure your content, then apply a Theme. There's a good choice of Themes, many with a clean, modern look.

SUMMARY

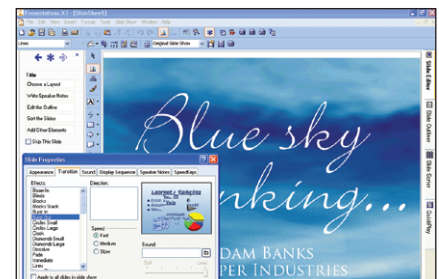
- ✓ Helpful approach
- ✓ Attractive templates and content
- ✗ Lacks PowerPoint's depth of features

PRESENTATION SOFTWARE Requires Windows 98 SE/2000/XP, 466MHz Pentium processor, 128MB RAM, up to 575MB disk space
SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk
DETAILS www.corel.co.uk/wordperfect

Transitions and builds are included, so you get a fully working presentation straight away. You can import PowerPoint files, with limitations; for example, all transitions are converted to one standard type. PerfectExpert continues to walk you through the process for as long as you like.

The user interface is a mixed bag. Panes and tabs have a neat, accessible look; menus and icons are more conventional. It was easy to get along with, but when it didn't work as expected,

it was hard to fathom why. Lots of drawing functions add graphics to your slides. The range of graphs is similar to PowerPoint, and you can also construct org charts, but for other diagrams you're on your own. Text formatting is comprehensive but you can't add a shadow to text, which is a useful way to make it legible over a background.



▲ WordPerfect Presentations is very accessible, and the supplied graphics are good-looking

You can save your presentation in native WordPerfect Office format with fonts embedded for other users, or export a PowerPoint file, again with limitations. Show on the Go lets you save your slideshow with a viewer program.

Presentations is a decent component within WordPerfect Office. If it was available separately at a reasonable price, it would be worth a look as a PowerPoint alternative.

From Flash to PDF Other approaches to presentations

Presentation software isn't the only means of preparing presentations, especially if you want something different from the standard approach. At the high end of the market, general-purpose multimedia authoring packages such as Macromedia Director MX 2004 (around £1,000), now owned by Adobe, are used to produce all-singing, all-dancing shows for major corporate events.

Macromedia's Flash format is also worth considering: originally known for clean, efficient vector graphics, it can incorporate other kinds of content, including video. The authoring package, Macromedia Flash (now part of the Adobe stable) is available in Basic and Pro versions from around £300. A

number of other animation and presentation packages can export Flash (*.swf) files.

For a shallower learning curve, there's a relatively new category of budget media creation software from makers such as Roxio (www.roxio.com) and Ulead (www.ulead.com). Primarily aimed at creating slideshows and home movie presentations, these programs lack the business templates and tools provided in office presentation software but allow you to import images, video clips and audio and sequence them into customised shows, often in a more flexible way. Another option is to produce your presentation as a DVD, using standard DVD content formats for menus and clips. DVD-authoring packages are available

from these and other companies from budget prices to several hundred pounds for professional solutions.

Adobe's PDF format also looks interesting for presentations, especially if you want to deliver materials for user playback. You may think of it as a static medium for reproducing printed pages, but in fact there's a lot of interactivity that can be added to PDFs using the Adobe Acrobat Professional authoring package, which costs around £400. Content can be imported from most applications, and you can control how documents are presented, include links and buttons to step through content and incorporate multimedia items and web links. **CS**